O'Neill's Ireland: Old Sod or Blarney Bog?

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Eugene O'Neill spent the summer of 1923 with his second wife, Agnes Boulton, and their son, Sean, then three years old, in an abandoned Coast Guard station not far from Provincetown on Peaked Hill Bars. Charles A. Merrill of The Boston Sunday Globe reported that O'Neill was preparing that summer to take his family on a journey "across the desolate sand dunes towards Provincetown on the first leg of a long pilgrimage—a pilgrimage to Ireland, the land of his ancestors" (38). “I am all Irish,” O'Neill told Merrill. “I have always wanted to go to Ireland” (39).

Neither that summer nor at any time during his life, did O'Neill ever undertake the Irish-American pilgrimage de rigueur back to "the old sod" that others he knew, including his father, completed. And, although as a 1948 New Yorker profile cheekily noted, O'Neill "has never marched in a St. Patrick's Day Parade or done anything else to call attention to his Celtic descent" (Basso 225) the playwright himself confided to his son Eugene Jr., "One thing that explains more than anything else about me is the fact that I'm Irish. And, strangely enough, it is something that all the writers who have attempted to explain me and my work have overlooked" (Gelb 118). Nonetheless, to read O'Neill's ethnicity through the actual texts of his plays is to embark upon a long journey that, riddled with problems and inconsistencies, leads to a shebeen of the mind where, as Sara Melody says in A Touch of the Poet (1942; 1958), "You can't tell any more what's dead and a lie, and what's the living truth" (167). The Irish characters of his early work, especially, are mired in a textual blarney bog, but one of the ways O'Neill's growth as a dramatist can be measured is by his increasingly complex treatment of ethnicity through the Irish men and women who populate, and finally come to dominate, his last plays.

By the late nineteenth century, the Stage Irishman, a recurring character with certain fundamental attributes, had become a stock figure in popular theater. As England's hold on Ireland evolved into a complex exercise of imperialistic power with often devastating results, the character of the Stage Irishman began regularly to appear in two manifestations: the loud, drunken solider or sailor, and the
crafty, sentimental peasant. As David Krause has noted, both characters have roots in Roman comedy—the former in the braggart warrior, the latter in the wily parasite slave (39). Theater historians have traced the Irish braggart warrior's ancestry back to Macmorris, a captain in the English King's Army who appears in William Shakespeare's *Henry V* long enough to get some laughs for being proud of his native country; according to Declan Kiberd, Macmorris exhibits "those traits of excitability, eloquence, pugnacity and strong national pride which would later become the stock-in-trade of the Stage Irishman" (39). The sentimental peasant, often a trickster and usually illiterate, was as prone to tears as he was to drink. Although he shared with the warrior both a love of country and a belief in superstitions fused together from Roman Catholicism and Irish folklore, the peasant, however, substituted a shillelagh for the warrior's sword, choreographed his military march into a jig, and transposed his bombast into a lilting tenor. All the rage on London stages and in English music halls during the Irish Diaspora that followed the famine of the 1840s, this version of the Stage Irishman reached new heights of popularity—and new audiences, including theater-goers in Dublin and New York—in the plays of Dion Boucicault, the Anglo-Irish theater impresario, who wrote *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), *Arrah-na-Pogue* (1864), and *The Shaughraun* (1874)—each of which provided him a star turn as the wily, sentimental Irish peasant. Due largely to the pervasiveness of Boucicault's plays, versions of this stock character, by the early twentieth century, had become a staple of the American stage and of vaudeville across the country. It is doubtful that O'Neill, who toured the United States with his father's *Count of Monte Cristo* and often parlayed James O'Neill's good name for theater tickets, would not have been familiar with Boucicault and his many imitators. And there is little doubt at all that O'Neill himself, when he turned to writing plays, relied upon the Irish stereotypes perfected by Boucicault as a kind of shorthand that saved him the detailed development of character that, in time, would come to define his most important and original work.

The Provincetown sea plays provide ample evidence of this early method. It is not surprising, given the constraints of the one-act form, that the microcosm aboard the *S.S. Glencairn* includes crew with such ethnically specific names as Yank, Scotty, Ivan and Cock(ne)y—parenthetical addition mine—and that their shipmates, such as Olson, Smitty, and Big Frank are quickly identified by O'Neill's stage directions and his attempts to write dialect, as, respectively, a Swede, an Englishman, and a Dutchman. Into this mix, however, O'Neill has added two sailors who share his ethnicity—the veteran Driscoll, who was based on a real-life counterpart with the same name, and the unfortunately named Paddy. Through these two characters, O'Neill presents versions of the braggart soldier and the wily servant, and the tension between these two categories of Stage Irishmen remained an unresolved, and often revisited, conflict in his subsequent career.

In "Bound East for Cardiff" (1913; 1916) Driscoll has the bearing of a modern warrior; O'Neill describes him as "A brawny Irishman with the battered features of a prize fighter" (35). He is "a tall, powerful Irishman" (59) in "The Long Voyage Home" (1916; 1917), but by "In The Zone" (1916; 1917) O'Neill eschews altogether a description of the veteran sailor, instead punctuating the Stage Irishman's first entrance with this direction: "Driscoll flies into an unreasoning rage" (86). The gentlest of these three plays, "Bound East for Cardiff," shows Driscoll reluctantly assuming the role of a deathbed priest ministering to the dying Yank as the two trade reminiscences of their rough sailing life. Faced with his friend's impending death, Driscoll criticizes himself for showing signs of sentimentality.
"Divil take me if I'm not startin' to blubber loike an auld woman," he says (38)—and conjures up an image from Irish folklore when he shakes his fist at the Norwegian Paul for playing the accordion—"Is that banshee schreechin' fit music for a sick man?" he yells (39). Despite his warrior demeanor, Driscoll reverts to Stage Irish type when he slips back into Roman Catholicism, making the sign of the cross three times during the play and falling with a sob to his knees next to Yank's bunk as "His lips move in some half-remembered prayer" (50).

Bragging that he is "dhrunk as a lord" (60), Driscoll orders "Irish whiskey" when he stumbles into "the bar of a low dive on the London water front" (56) in "The Long Voyage Home." Inaccurate geography notwithstanding—London has the River Thames, but no seafront—Driscoll provocatively asserts his Irish ethnicity in this English locale: he leads his fellow seamen in singing "We ar-re the byes of Wee-exford who fought wid heart an' hand," and he defiantly condemns Ireland's Unionist counties with a curse: "To hell wid Ulster!" (63) Although Driscoll himself had been robbed in this same pub some five or six years previously, his drunken bravado has led to his return and, at the play's end, in his thick-headed response to the bartender's lie that Ollie has not been robbed but has picked up a prostitute, he demands the means to assure his denial: "Give me whiskey, Irish whiskey!" (77).

As the S.S. Glencairn sails unfriendly seas during wartime in "In the Zone," Driscoll exhibits the nervousness he shares with the crew as bursts of anger and boasts of courage. "God blarst ut!" he yells furiously. "No man at all cud be puttin' up wid the loike av this-an I'm not wan to be fearin' anything or any man in the world'll stand up to me face to face" (95). Among the entire crew, only the Stage Irishman Driscoll is brave enough—or sufficiently fool-hardy—to open Smitty's suspicious black box, and, once the contents are revealed as letters, Driscoll, although he does not display a Stage Irishman's customary illiteracy, does offer an excuse before he reads the letters aloud to the crew: "I'm no hand to be readin' but I'll try ut" (103). Driscoll also acts the Irish Stage warrior when he angrily stuffs the Smitty's mouth with a rag to shut the Englishman up. This brief moment of Irish triumph over the English begins to fade, however, as the crew realizes the box contains nothing more dangerous than some personal love letters, and Driscoll, aware that this small battle has made a fool of him, quietly unties Smitty and loosens his gag.

In "The Moon of the Caribbees" (1916; 1918), O'Neill's portrait of Driscoll gains some complexity through the addition of another Stage Irishman, Paddy, who functions as a foil to Driscoll. Consistent with the other sea plays, Driscoll, "a powerfully built Irishman," according to O'Neill's stage directions (4), continues to share traits with the braggart Stage Irish warrior. By the play's third page, Driscoll declares, "I'm dyin' wid impatience to have a dhrink" (6-7), and one page later, he delivers this threat: "I'll split the skull av the first wan av ye starts to foight" (8). Like a seasoned warrior, Driscoll leads his shipmates in rousing song. He also "reaches inside his shirt and pulls out a pint bottle" (13) from which he proudly drinks, and he organizes a clandestine booze run for the crew. Despite O'Neill's stage direction requiring Driscoll to do "a few jig steps on the deck" (10) to celebrate the success of this secret plan, Driscoll has the awkwardness of a career seaman, stepping all over Bella's toes when they dance, prompting her to label him a "clumsy Mick" (25).

In contrast to Driscoll, the traits of the wily, subversive servant are embodied in the aging Paddy, "a
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squat, ugly Liverpool Irishman," according to O'Neill's stage directions (7). Cocky calls Paddy "a 'airy ape" (12), an insult which, despite O'Neill's later recycling of the epitaph to describe Yank, his American Everyman in *The Hairy Ape* (1921; 1922), can be read as evidence of the ignorant Cocky's indoctrination by British caricatures and cartoons, persisting well into the twentieth century, in which exaggerated Simian features were accorded Irish peasants and Irish leaders alike. Moreover, Bella describes Paddy as "the dirty swine!" (17)—a common slur linking Irish peasants with the pigs they often raised. Echoing the wily Irish servants that preceded him on the stage, Paddy's first utterance in "The Moon of the Caribbees" is a superstitious oath undermining his superior, the ship's First Mate: "To the divil wid him" (7); and, reinforcing the stereotype of the sexually repressed Irish peasant drowning his libido with alcohol, Paddy proclaims, "Never mind the girls. Where's the dhrink?" (15). Like the illiterate Stage Irish peasant, Paddy admits, "I can't write me name" (17), and, true to his trickster prototype, Paddy, in reaction to the inept dancing of Cocky and Susie "sticks his foot out and the wavering couple stumble over it and fall flat on the deck" (26). Keeping his earlier vow to break up any fights, Driscoll responds by throwing a punch at Paddy with a warrior's seasoned precision, igniting a full-scale brawl that climaxes with Paddy being knifed. Says Yank of the probable culprit, "Cocky, I bet" (27), thus affording O'Neill, through this minor clash, an allusion to the centuries-old assault of the English against the Irish. Paddy's omission from the other sea plays frees O'Neill to focus on his Stage Irish foil, Driscoll, although the fact that, according to the First Mate, Paddy suffered "only a flesh wound" (27), serves metadramatic notice that the theater wings remain open for the peasant Stage Irishman—whether he is named Paddy or not—to make his another entrance in later O'Neill plays.

O'Neill merges the two versions of the Stage Irishman in both the farmer Pat Sweeny in *The Rope* (1918) and the widower Bill Carmody in *The Straw* (1918-19). O'Neill describes Sweeny at his first entrance as having "evidently been drinking" (172); similarly Carmody "has very evidently been drinking" (57) when he arrives with his daughter at the Hill Farm Sanatorium, and, to the delight of O'Neill's stand-in, Stephen Murray, Carmody soon "pulls out a pint flask, half full" (58). Sweeny, alone with his wife once his ornery father-in-law Bentley leaves the barn in *The Rope*, "takes a full quart flask of whiskey from the pocket of his coat and has a big drink" (179). Sweeny's subsequent interrogation of the returning Luke, which he describes as "blarneyed round to fool him an' find out what he's wantin'" (183), begins as Sweeny "pulls the bottle from his coat pocket—with a wink" (185). O'Neill moves from this playful gesture, associated with the sly and conniving Irish servant, to Irish superstition, which both Sweeny and Carmody express by making the Catholic Sign of the Cross. In response to Bentley's hiss of "Papist!" (172), Sweeny "instinctively crosses himself" (173), whereas Carmody "crosses himself with pious unction" when he mentions his late wife (38). Pugnacious and violent, both men also have daughters named Mary whose function, in part, is to serve as potential targets for the wrath and ignorance of their Irish fathers: "I'll have no more reading or I'll take the strap to you!" threatens Carmody (38); "Run help your mother now or I'll give you a good hidin'," orders Sweeny (184).

O'Neill's reliance upon such stereotypes seems especially troubling in light of his admiration for Ireland's Abbey Theater, whose performances he witnessed in 1911 at the Maxine Elliott Theater in New York City during the Abbey's first American tour. An important goal of the Irish Literary Theater,
which, in 1904, had officially opened its doors in Dublin on Abbey Street—thus the source of its unofficial name—was expressed by Lady Augusta Gregory and William Butler Yeats, two of the theater's co-founders, in this way: "We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery or of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but as the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us" (Gregory, 20). By the time O'Neill's apprentice plays were first being performed in Provincetown, Dublin's 1916 Easter Rising had taken place within blocks of the Abbey Theater, and, on into the 1920s, while Ireland fought to win independence from England and suffered through a bitter civil war in the aftermath of that victory, O'Neill continued writing the plays that established his reputation. His lack of interest in Ireland's political upheavals may be attributed to O'Neill's disdain for politics in general; nonetheless, the hackneyed, often offensive, Stage Irishmen he inserted into his plays during these years suggests, at best, a naive acceptance of ethnic stereotyping that affirmed the experiences of his decidedly well-heeled life, and, at worst, a conscious and condescending choice to ignore the many facets of an ethnicity that he may have shared but, until his mature years, never fully understood. Irish-Americans, who followed the example of their countrymen back in Dublin by interrupting the Abbey's New York performance of John Millington Synge's The Playboy of the Western World with a barrage of booing and showers of rotten vegetables, prompted O'Neill, twelve years later, to dismiss the rioters with the baseless opinion that "The Irish can't laugh at themselves" (Gelb 172). O'Neill, whose interest in the Irish Players centered on their sincere, naturalistic acting style, something that he had never before encountered, failed to appreciate the political nuances of Playboy, in which Synge, an Anglo-Irish Protestant, mercilessly ridicules Ireland's Catholic peasants through characters that most Irish audiences of the time found alien to their experience. The theater rioting, especially by the Irish emigrants in America, can be contextualized as part of a series of attempts by the Irish to forge their own post-colonial identity—an endeavor to which O'Neill contributed little until the remarkable portraits of the Irish in the Tao House plays.

Various critics have suggested that the Abbey's New York run influenced O'Neill's first Pulitzer prize-winning play, Beyond the Horizon (1918; 1920) by noting the similarity of its plot to that of T. C. Murray's The Birthright, which O'Neill saw the Irish Players perform. The connection between the two plays notwithstanding, of equal interest is that O'Neill gave to Robert and Andrew, the ill-fated brothers of Beyond the Horizon, the surname Mayo, which is the Irish county where Synge's Playboy of the Western World is set. Much later, of course, O'Neill assigned the name of another Irish county, Tyrone, which was the ancient seat of Irish kings, to the members of his own family in Long Day's Journey Into Night (1939-41; 1956). Shreds of Synge's Playboy float like a fog through many of O'Neill's plays, notably A Touch of the Poet (1935-42; 1958) which, like Playboy, is set in a shebeen owned by a domineering Irishman whose rebellious daughter's love for a poetic young man is shattered by reality.

From the fog of Synge’s influence, too, emerges an Irishman in Anna Christie (1920; 1921), the most significant of O'Neill's early plays, chiefly because he is struggling to connect non-heroic characters—a sailor, a stoker, and a hooker—with mythic forces the characters themselves only vaguely apprehend. Nonetheless, O'Neill intimates early in the play that the Stage Irishman still informed his thinking. According to O'Neill's stage direction, as Chris Christopherson enters Johnny-the-Priest's saloon, he
"has evidently been drinking" (41)—the same phrase O'Neill previously used to describe his Irish drunkards—yet, before we are prodded to rethink drunkenness as anything other than a condition of being Irish, Chris announces with a grin, "Oder fallar on oder barge-Irish fallar—he got bottle whisky and we drank it, yust us two" (41).

Pulled from the cleansing water of "dat ole davil, sea" into the ironic safety of the Simeon Winthrop, a barge "at anchor in the outer harbor of Province town, Mass" (58), Mat Burke seems almost baptized into new possibilities, but the rescued stoker, as Jean Chothia has noted, is not much of an improvement over Carmody in The Straw; both "are crudely drawn stage Irishmen out of the nineteenth century theater" (61). Edward L. Shaughnessy, however, contends that "Mat Burke was not created to be, and in truth is not, a stage Irishman" (61). O'Neill's stage directions in Anna Christie never describe Mat Burke as Irish, perhaps an indication that O'Neill believed the dialect he had written for Mat, which sounds like a derivative of the language Synge invented for his plays, would be Irish enough. Shaughnessy has also noted that when Anna Christie eventually reached the Dublin stage in 1929, "Most of Mat's speeches were called by critics a weak imitation of Synge, a creation designed to recall Christy Mahon, 'the playboy of the western world'" (61). To many in Ireland, Mat also suggested a formula character, and the ample detail O'Neill provides in his stage directions clearly mark Mat Burke as the familiar braggart warrior Stage Irishman. "He is a powerful, broad-chested six-footer, his face handsome in a hard, rough, bold, defiant way," O'Neill writes, and when Mat realizes his near-death ordeal is over, "He makes the sign of the cross mechanically" (63) in thanks, a recognizable superstitious bit of business that O'Neill uses to convey Mat's Roman Catholicism and that he brings back for an encore near the play's end when, after Mat produces "a small, cheap old crucifix" that he says "was given me by my mother, God rest her soul" and upon which he demands Anna swear her fealty to him, the Irishman again "makes the sign of the cross mechanically" (101). Although he describes himself to Anna as "a clumsy ape" (66), Mat brags about his great strength, boasting that his fellow stokers were "fearing a clout of my right arm more than they'd fear the sea itself" (67). Stubborn as well, Mat tells Anna, "I'm a divil for sticking it out when them that's weak give up" (67), and he possesses as well the requisite quick temper of the warrior Stage Irishman. After he effortlessly strips old Chris of a knife intended for his guts, Mat's personality changes instantly: "With a sudden rush of anger, drawing back his fist" dictated by the stage directions, Mat says, "I've half a mind to hit you a great clout will put sense in your square head. Kape off me now, I'm warning you!" (79); Mat’s admonition is punctuated with a push "of the flat of his hand which sends the old Swede staggering back against the cabin wall" (80). When Anna tries to convince Mat of the redemptive power of their love—"Will you believe it if I tell you that loving you has made me—clean?" (88)—Mat reacts, according to O'Neill's directions, by "blazing out—turning on her in a perfect frenzy of rage—his voice trembling with passion" (88). "God's curse on you! " he yells. "Clane is it? You slut, you! I'll be killing you now!" In full, furious battle mode against Anna, warrior Mat picks up a chair and, “swinging it high over his shoulder, springs towards her” (88).

Irrational and violent in the predictable way of the Stage Irishman, Mat at times is also more complex than his stereotyped ancestors. For example, the Stage Irishman's obligatory drunken entrance in O'Neill's previous work is layered, in Mat's case, with additional emotional insight. Beyond "the results of heavy drinking" that Mat is suffering when he stagers back to Anna, O'Neill in his stage directions
notes, "there is an expression in his eyes of wild mental turmoil, of impotent animal rage baffled by its own abject misery" (95). Moreover, in contrast to the sexually repressed Irish stereotype, O'Neill describes Mat in highly erotic language, providing him as well with a sexually-charged initial appearance in the second act—"He is stripped to the waist, has on nothing but a pair of dirty dungaree pants" (63)—that connects the handsome and muscular Irishman to the beautiful characters of Celtic myth. Whether or not Synge's relatively frank treatment of sexuality in Playboy may have opened that aspect of the Irish character as a viable topic for O'Neill, he certainly has quoted Playboy indirectly throughout Anna Christie in other ways. The short form of Anna's last name, for example, is a variation of the spelling of Christy, Synge's protagonist, and Mat's scornful statement---"Killed, is it? It'd take more than a bit of a blow to crack my thick skull" (65)—allude to Playboy's twice unsuccessful patricide by a løy to the head. And, in sending Mat Burke, an Irishman, into the future on an English ship called The Londonderry, O'Neill, by the end of Anna Christie, also may have slyly acknowledged the post-colonial struggle in Ireland that is foreshadowed in Playboy. Despite his strength and bravado, Mat will perform at sea, as the Stage Irishman almost always had done, to please his English superiors—the same English who, in a capricious show of colonial might, changed the name of Derry, Ulster's stronghold Unionist city, to Londonderry.

Paddy, the curmudgeonly Irish stoker of The Hairy Ape (1921; 1922), initially seems to indicate that O'Neill, within a year of creating Mat Burke, has reverted to (stereo)type. An "old, wizened Irishman" (111), Paddy is roused from a drunken sleep to lead his fellow stokers in song. "I'm never too drunk to sing," he boasts while holding to the edge of his bunk for support (111). Although, according to O'Neill's stage directions, "his face is extremely monkey-like" (111), a detail that recalls Cocky's insult of Paddy in "The Moon Over the Caribbees," Paddy is but one among many two-dimensional characters in The Hairy Ape, for Expressionism dealt with broadly fashioned characters who reflected even broader themes in the service of the play. Yank, who is crushed in a gorilla's embrace at the climax of The Hairy Ape, shares his name with the seaman who breathes his last in "Bound East for Cardiff;” as with Paddy and Paddy, the repetition of a generic name such as Yank helps emphasize the insignificance of the lives being lived in both plays.

Ironically foreshadowing his own self-discovery at the end of The Hairy Ape, Yank tells Paddy, “Yuh don't belong!” (118), an observation that can be applied, in a much larger sense, to the Stage Irishman in O'Neill's work, for after The Hairy Ape, the stereotype disappears. Dull-witted Irish serving girls in Ah, Wilderness! (1932; 1933) and Long Day’s Journey Into Night—Nora and Cathleen, respectively—might seem to contradict this assertion; recent stagings of both plays, however, have astutely demonstrated that the presence of these servants from the immigrant peasantry provides more an opportunity for deconstructing class stratification among Irish-Americans than an occasion for comic relief.

Almost fifteen years after The Hairy Ape, O'Neill began A Touch of the Poet, his play that most specifically—and problematically—confronts Irish ethnicity and identity. Set in a shebeen outside Boston in 1828, the play features a tangible marriage of the two Stage Irish stereotypes—the braggart warrior, Con Melody, and the sentimental peasant, his wife Nora. The seven years O'Neill worked on the play—1935 through 1942—provide some indication of the complexity of its issues for him, and the
completed text, which was not produced until 1958, at times plays like a cacophony of Irish demons being cast out from a prison of ethnic stereotypes. Still, the final moments of A Touch of the Poet are dominated by one of the most startling images in all of O’Neill. Wrapped in his tattered British army uniform while speaking in a thick Irish brogue, the defeated Con Melody personifies the ravages colonialism can visit upon individual identity, and, sagging into an old chair in the kingdom of his tavern, he embodies the fusion of the two traditions of the Stage Irishmen—braggart warrior and sentimental peasant. The series of remarkable Irish characters that followed, all of whom inhabit the other Tao House plays—The Iceman Cometh (1939; 1947), Long Day’s Journey Into Night, and A Moon for the Misbegotten (1943; 1947)—demonstrate a shared ancestry with their creator, and through them, O’Neill, whose feet never touched the “old sod” of Ireland, saw past the blarney and into the souls of people who, like him, were Irish. In Larry Slade, in the four haunted Tyrones, in Phil Hogan, and, especially, in the luminous Josie Hogan, O’Neill transcended ethnicity to create characters who belong, not just to Ireland or to the Irish in America, but to the timeless theater of the world.

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[This paper was originally presented at the Sixth International Conference of the Eugene O’Neill Society in Provincetown, Massachusetts in June, 2005.]

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